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Knowledge for a Common World? On the Place of Feminist Epistemology in Philosophy of Education

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Academic Editor: Andrew Stables

Received: 7 January 2016; Accepted: 3 March 2016; Published: 9 March 2016

Abstract: The paper discusses the place of feminist epistemology in philosophy of education. Against frequently raised criticisms, the paper argues that the issues raised by feminist standpoint theory lead neither to a reduction of questions of knowledge to questions of power or politics nor to the endorsement of relativism. Within the on-going discussion in feminist epistemology, we can find lines of argument which provide the grounds for a far more radical critique of the traditional, narrow notion of objectivity, revealing it as inherently flawed and inconsistent and allowing for the defense of a re-worked, broader, more accurate understanding of objectivity. This is also in the interest of developing a strong basis for a feminist critique of problematically biased and repressive epistemological practices which can further be extended to shed light on the way in which knowledge has become distorted through the repression of other non-dominant epistemic standpoints. Thus, requiring a thorough re-thinking of our conceptions of objectivity and rationality, feminist epistemologies need to be carefully considered in order to improve our understanding of what knowledge for a common world implies in the pluralistic and diverse societies of post-traditional modernity in the 21st century.

Keywords: feminist epistemology; situated knowledge; objectivity; relativism

1. Introduction

In this paper I will speak about feminist epistemologies and their place within philosophy of education. To start with, I would like to recall a quote from cultural critic and feminist theorist bell hooks' influential book *Feminism is for everybody* in which she describes her experience with her audience's reaction to the different parts of her theoretic engagements. While the interest in her work as a writer in general and as a critic of popular culture, movies and media is characterized by an unhindered enthusiasm, her commitment to feminism is met with greater skepticism on the side of the general audience. This skepticism towards the aims and goals of feminist theorizing is every so often also tangible in the epistemological discussions of feminist theories of knowledge in philosophy of education. But before we turn to this, let us listen to hooks:

It is easy for the diverse public I encounter to understand what I do as a cultural critic, to understand my passion for writing (lots of folks want to write, and do). But feminist theory—that's the place where the questions stop. Instead I tend to hear all about the evil of feminism and the bad feminists: how "they" hate men; how "they" want to go against nature and god; how "they" are all lesbians; how "they" are taking all the jobs and making the world hard for white men, who do not stand a chance. When I ask these same folks about the feminist books or magazines they read, when I ask them about the feminist talks they have heard, about the feminist activists they know, they respond by letting me know that everything they know about feminism has come into their lives third

hand, that they really have not come close enough to feminist movement to know what really happens, what it's really about. Mostly they think feminism is a bunch of angry women who want to be like men. They do not even think about feminism as being about rights—about women gaining equal rights. When I talk about the feminism I know—up close and personal—they willingly listen, although when our conversations end, they are quick to tell me I am different, not like the “real” feminists who hate men, who are angry. I assure them I am as a real and as radical a feminist as one can be, and if they dare to come closer to feminism they will see it is not how they have imagined it. [1] (p. xi ff.)

The blunt and uninformed aversion against feminist theorizing, which hooks describes, surely does not translate directly into a comprehensive picture of the reception of feminist epistemologies in philosophy of education today. The ongoing academic debate nevertheless appears distorted by pre-existing biases. One of my main goals with this paper is to convince philosophers of education “to come closer to feminism” in order to “see it is not how they have imagined it”. Indeed, my goal is to show that when feminist epistemologists and what is considered mainstream academic epistemology came closer to each other without the inhibitions of pre-formed opinions, we might arrive at a point where a serious discussion could first begin. Such a discussion could then be based on content-oriented argumentation advancing our conception of knowledge necessary for understanding adequately the diverse social reality we encounter in the beginning of the 21st century rather than spinning around merely imaginary enemies, cardboard figures and perceived threats.

2. What do Feminists Want in Epistemology and Why Does This Pose a Problem?

Epistemological questions and the development, advance and assessment of theories of knowledge have occupied the minds of philosophers of education since the initial establishment of the field. It is not surprising that these questions are of major interest to the field and have received a great amount of attention. One major aim of education is without doubt the acquisition and transmission of knowledge. This raises questions not just about which beliefs we, as a community of educators, hold to be true and important enough to impart to the younger generation or to the hitherto uninitiated. Rather, our educational efforts directed at fostering future subjects of knowledge also raise questions regarding our practices of inquiry and justification and the way in which we are introduced into these practices.

Within general philosophy, the problem which feminist authors have been highlighting is the way in which our epistemological practices are biased in ways which exclude or disadvantage women. The development of feminist epistemologies has been undertaken in order to correct and improve our understanding of knowledge and to make our epistemological practice more inclusive and fair from the standpoint of women. Many feminists have argued that we need to re-think our customary conceptions of knowledge and take into adequate account the particular, contextual, embodied and emotional dimensions and conditions of knowledge generation. This includes a thorough-going reflection on the sexist biases and power imbalances that systematically undermine the interests of women (and other disadvantaged groups) in our educational and scientific practices. Women have been excluded as objects as well as subjects of knowledge. Scientific work in for example biology, medicine, history and economy has systematically ignored the bodies, life experiences and the work of women. All these instances of what has been described as “the politics of knowledge-ignorance” [2] (p. 218) have led to a lack of knowledge and sometimes an intentionally produced ignorance regarding the world as seen from the perspective of and as relevant to the lives of women. Women have also been denied their status as subjects of knowledge due to structures which Miranda Fricker more recently has described as “epistemic injustice” [3]. Women have been denied access to education and educational institutions, their intellectual work has not received the same attention as the work accomplished by men, and more than one prominent male philosopher has characterized women as irrational and incapable of intellectual achievement or even sound judgment. One of the primary steps for feminist philosophers has therefore been to work on rectifying the philosophical canon from which women authors have

been largely absent. In her seminal essay “Excluding women from the educational realm” [4] and other works, Jane Roland Martin has carefully shown the consequences of these biases for philosophy of education. As Martin argues, excluding women as “both subjects and objects of educational thought from the standard texts and anthologies” [4] (p. 41f.) not only neglects historical figures such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Maria Montessori, Catharine Beecher, or Charlotte Perkins Gilman and thus underrepresents the work women philosophers of education have contributed to the field, but it also leads to a distorted portrayal and evaluation of girls’ education, of the role of female educators and furthermore hurts the field itself on a content level, subscribing to an inadequate division of “mind and body; thought and action; and reason, feeling, and emotion” [4] (p. 54).

Against the modernist ideal of (scientific) knowledge the claim to a feminist epistemology might at first glance appear like a “contradiction in terms” [5] (p. 445). This ideal originated in the context of the more general struggle to free our thinking from religious indoctrination and emphasizes objectivity and insight based on observation. In this way it aims at a relative neutrality with regard to the social and political status of the knower. In contrast, one of the main foci of the vast body of feminist work in epistemology has been to stress that knowers are socially situated. The feminist philosopher of education Barbara J. Thayer-Bacon, for example, argued for a “relational epistemology” [6] which emphasizes the historical and social dimension of knowledge: “people have a past and have been affected by others’ views” [6] (p. 242) and holds that “all knowledge is value-laden or interest-laden, and that cognitive pursuits and their social organization are not independent entities” [6] (p. 242). Such a position creates multiple tensions with the modernist conception of knowledge as politically neutral, and these tensions appear clearly when we take a look at the way in which feminist epistemology has been received within philosophy of education.

On the one hand, the claims raised by feminist epistemology appear to largely align with other calls for revisions or the abolishment of the modernist epistemological paradigm by educational theorists working from postcolonial, postmodernist, critical theorist, multiculturalist, anti-racist or LGBTQA perspectives. From the perspective of critical pedagogy, we find for example J. L. Kincheloe emphasizing the importance of discussing power in relation to knowledge in order to counter the oppressive implications of the globalizing neo-colonial world for educational institutions, research and knowledge production in the beginning of the 21st century [7]. Similar questions have been raised within the context of multicultural education, most prominently here by James Banks [8], and it has been stated that “newer epistemologies and methodologies are reinventing multicultural education in the 21st century” [9] (p. 91). On the other hand, however, these claims towards alternative epistemologies and educational researchers’ loose use of epistemology in the plural and as almost interchangeable with “methodology” has irritated epistemologists in philosophy of education. In a roundtable discussion between Lynda Stone, Lorraine Code, Denis Phillips, Harvey Siegel, and Claudia Ruitenberg [10] (p. 121 ff.) it was clear that all discussants agreed to some extent that “epistemologies” was sometimes used at education departments in place of what would more correctly be described as “methodologies”, but while Phillips and Siegel took this as displaying a certain “disdain for the field of epistemology” [10] (p. 125), Ruitenberg, Stone and Code attributed these uses to a more general lack of a complex take on epistemology, and nevertheless as an expression of a deeper, furthergoing challenge for epistemology itself. To be sure, all discussants agreed that the claim of marginalized voices to be equally heard was a valid concern. But they disagreed strongly on whether this was a question of social justice, with the political dimension of knowledge being at most of minor importance to epistemology (Phillips, Siegel), or whether it articulated an important and central challenge for epistemology itself (Code, Ruitenberg, Stone). This difference between the roundtable discussants was to a large extent also paralleled by whether they placed themselves in the so-called analytic or continental tradition. The idea that feminist and other challenges to the modernist paradigm in epistemology are somehow threatening to epistemology as a field, also shows when Harvey Siegel “situates” himself as writing in the “no longer dominant (let alone hegemonic) analytic style” [11]. It is not the purpose of this paper to judge whether this perceived marginal position of the (male) analytic epistemologists corresponds to

actual numbers of publications and citations in relevant philosophy of education journals, rather I will try to stay with the content-oriented question of whether and to which extent the particular criticisms raised by feminist epistemologists pose a challenge to the modernist paradigm in epistemology that should be taken seriously by anybody with a serious interest in the field.

One blatant example for how these tensions have played out within philosophy of education can be found in two different special issues released in the journal *Educational Theory*. The editors of the special issue on “What Feminist Inquiry Contributes to Philosophy and Philosophy of Education” in *Educational Theory*, Barbara Thayer-Bacon and Gayle Turner, state that “one of the significant contributions feminist inquiry has made to contemporary philosophy and the philosophy of education is standpoint epistemology” [12] (p. 300). As Thayer-Bacon and Turner summarize, feminist standpoint epistemologists “have soundly argued for the limits of knowers, as situated knowers embedded within a particular context (including time, location, and culture), and [that] they have made visible the role power plays in theories of knowledge (that the criteria and standards used to judge good scholarship and research are not neutral or unbiased)” [12] (p. 301). However, if we were to take a subsequent issue of the same journal focusing on “Epistemology and Education” as an indication for how standpoint epistemology has been received within philosophy of education, Thayer-Bacon’s and Turner’s assessment of feminist impact might appear overly optimistic. While Harvey Siegel, in the introduction to the issue, points out that philosophers of education have been discussing the “leading figures in the challenge to the epistemological legacy of Logical Positivism and the development of a post-positivist philosophy of science” [13] (p. 123), feminist standpoint theorists are apparently not considered an important part of the post-positivist tradition in epistemology and only receive explicit attention in the “Afterwords” of said issue.

There, the author Dennis Cato charges Maureen Ford’s article on feminist epistemologies of situated knowledge [14] in the afore-mentioned issue edited by Thayer-Bacon and Turner as having “nothing to contribute to either philosophy or philosophy of education” and as trying “to hijack epistemology in the interests of her feminist agenda” [15] (p. 249). The author’s anxiety of feminist terrorist attacks on epistemology shapes the short text throughout so strongly that it is somewhat of a challenge to extract specific and clear points of criticism from it. Nevertheless, it appears that the more cogent parts of his worry seem to center on two rather common charges which are raised against feminist standpoint epistemology. Firstly, the author worries about reductionist tendencies, claiming that standpoint epistemology attempts to “reduce epistemology to politics and power” [15] (p. 249). Secondly, he claims that feminist standpoint epistemology “must embrace an anything-goes relativism” [15] (p. 249) which, naturally, alarms and evokes the usual philosophical reservations against strongly relativist positions, appearing to require the abandonment of our claims to truth, rationality and objectivity.

The above example is one particularly drastic illustration of the conflicts and tensions that have arisen around the reception of feminist epistemology, and as we have seen in the example of the roundtable discussion (see above), we can also find more promising instances of serious mutual dialogue and acknowledgment between feminist and mainstream epistemologists in the field. However, the two main charges raised by Cato against Ford’s take on feminist standpoint epistemology nevertheless resound like a recurring theme also in these more amicable exchanges. When in the roundtable discussion Harvey Siegel willingly conceded that “the word ‘epistemology’ has evolved. [. . .] But I don’t think that says very much” [16] (p. 128). Lorraine Code replied “I think this says a lot” [16] (p. 128). My arguments in the following will side with Code in assuming that feminist epistemologists have articulated serious challenges for our conception of epistemology, rationality, and objectivity. They will also take into account some of Siegel’s concerns by emphasizing that feminists are not the only ones pushing for a post-positivist epistemology. It is not the primary aim of the present paper to defend Ford’s article itself against Cato’s fearful derisions. Such a defense has already been undertaken by James C. Lang who felt that the dismissal of Ford’s article required support from his “own masculine perspective” [16] (p. 75). Rather, I would like to present the breadth of positions

and arguments feminist epistemologists have developed regarding the intricate relationship between power and knowledge and how they have variously addressed the question of relativism.

Whereas Lang in his defense of Ford's article tries to argue for the plausibility of feminist epistemologies of situated knowledge with the help of Immanuel Kant and Lorraine Code from a roughly constructivist perspective, I will try to broaden the picture of options a little further. One difficulty I see with constructivist takes on knowledge is that rather than questioning the traditional, narrow conception of objectivity as an adequate *understanding* of objectivity and re-claiming a more adequate understanding of it, the constructivist approach arguably still subscribes to the narrow conception of objectivity in its rejection of it. As I will try to show in the following, within the on-going discussion in feminist epistemology, we can find lines of argument which provide the grounds for an even more radical critique of the traditional notion of objectivity in revealing it as inherently flawed and inconsistent, which allows for the defense of a re-worked, broader, more accurate understanding of objectivity. This is also in the interest of developing a strong basis for feminist critique of problematically biased and repressive epistemological practices which then can be further extended to shed light on the way in which the perspectives of other societal groups have similarly been repressed. The point of my argument will be to demonstrate that the issues raised by feminist standpoint theory do neither necessarily lead to a reduction of questions of knowledge to questions of power or politics nor to the endorsement of relativism, but rather require a thorough re-thinking of our conceptions of objectivity and rationality, and that they have to be carefully considered in the interest of improving our understanding of what knowledge for a common world implies in the pluralistic and diverse societies of post-traditional modernity in the 21st century.

3. Varieties of Feminist Epistemology and the Example of Different Takes on Objectivity

One of the aspects which the above example of the epistemological discussions in philosophy of education highlights is that the critical reception of feminist epistemology follows a rather limited perception of the field. For this reason, I will first give a rough overview of the variety of positions which feminist epistemologists have been defending throughout the last decades. In the further discussion I will then focus more narrowly on the particular charges against feminist epistemology in terms of an apparent endorsement of a reductivist and relativist conception of knowledge. The internal diversity within feminist epistemologies surrounding different conceptions of objectivity is meant to illustrate the breadth of the feminist discussion in contrast to some of the ways in which it has been understood and received within philosophy of education. Furthermore, by aligning and comparing the different positions on objectivity within feminist discourse with the perspectives defended within more general mainstream epistemology, feminist epistemologies rather than constituting an apparent anomaly within epistemology or, as Cato put it drastically, as attempting "to hijack epistemology" can be shown to be neatly paralleled by the criticisms and re-workings of traditional notions of objectivity put forth by other post-positivist epistemologies.

3.1. Historical Overview of Feminist Epistemologies

The following short overview of some major theoretical traditions of feminist epistemology will necessarily fall short of giving a comprehensive picture of the variety of approaches developed in the last decades. However, I hope it will serve as a useful introduction to illustrate the breadth and internal differences of the feminist discussion in epistemology for all those readers who so far, for various reasons, have not come into closer contact with this discussion. For this purpose, it is still helpful to follow Sandra Harding's 1986 distinction [17] between three central strands of feminist epistemologies: feminist standpoint theory, feminist postmodernism and feminist empiricism, and we will take a short look at each of these strands respectively. Harding's classification still provides a meaningful starting point to outline the scope and variety within and between the different traditions of feminist epistemology even though in today's discussion these positions have each advanced to a point where they are no longer as plainly separable.

One of the first prominent proponents of feminist standpoint theory was Nancy Hartsock [18] (pp. 105–312). As a form of critical theory, feminist standpoint theory aims at developing a critical theoretical description of the world in order for women to form an adequate understanding of the different forms of oppression they experience and to empower them to change and improve their own situation. Hartsock famously extended the argument György Lukács developed in his *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) about the privileged epistemic position of the proletariat [19] (pp. 149–222) to the idea that women's lives and experiences offer a similarly privileged epistemic perspective in sexist societies. Following and elaborating on Marx' theorizing, Lukács, one of the founders of Western Marxism, had argued that the way we think about society is mediated by the material conditions we live under. Therefore, even if an account of capitalist society will generally be biased in favor of the dominant class and even though the proletariat largely partakes in its own oppression by sharing these ideas, taking on the "standpoint of the proletariat", *i.e.*, exploring the experiences and living conditions of the proletariat, will ultimately reveal the shortcomings of the biased account, and thus bring us closer to an objective account of the social reality of capitalist society. The working classes in capitalist society suffer most under its detrimental consequences and therefore are placed in a privileged position with regard to attaining adequate knowledge about the objective reality of social relationships in capitalism. Similarly, so Nancy Hartsock's extension of that argument, while women might partake in their own oppression in sexist societies, their lives and experiences nevertheless reveal the suffering which can highlight the shortcomings of sexist societal visions. So, if we take on the standpoint of women in sexist societies, we will arrive at a more objective account of social reality in sexist societies. As Thayer-Bacon and Turner continue this line of thought, "blacks are more aware of racism than whites in white racist societies because they experience the results of that racism directly in their daily lives. The same is true for homosexual people living in a society where heterosexuality is taken for granted as the norm of society and homosexuality is treated as deviant or sinful" [12] (p. 300). The structural differences which show its negative consequences clearly in the lives, activities and experiences of women, ethnic, religious, and sexual minorities provide the basis for privileged epistemic standpoints similar to workers' lives forming a basis for the proletarian epistemic standpoint.

Due to their social position women, and by extension other oppressed societal minorities, attain different types of knowledge and understanding of social reality in sexist, racist, classist and heteronormative societies which can serve as a basis to challenge dominant visions and to arrive at a more objective view of social reality. However, it is important to note that just as the working classes' knowledge (in Lukács' terminology the consciousness of the proletariat) is not simply given, but has to be achieved in constant political struggle and theoretical analysis, similarly the knowledge available from a feminist epistemic standpoint is something that has to be continuously struggled for, theoretically as well as in political practice, in order to be able to serve and help us overcome the structural oppression of women.

One of the most important points of criticism against the position developed by Nancy Hartsock focused on the essentialist understanding of the category of woman. Insofar as the account seems to pre-suppose that women share a fundamental set of features which connects them all as a group, it did not pay sufficient attention to the way in which the identities, experiences and lives of women differ amongst different groups of women and even between different individuals. Stimulated by the criticism put forth by postmodernist, postcolonial, black, Latina and lesbian theorists, which will be further discussed below, feminist standpoint theory today has advanced so that it no longer pre-supposes one uniform epistemic standpoint which women inhabit qua being women. As exemplified in the later work of scholars like Harding [20,21] or Collins [22], feminist standpoint theorists now embrace a plurality of situated standpoints, trying to incorporate the various ways in which different experiences of living as a woman in sexist societies interrelates with other social positions such as class, race, sexual orientation, religion.

As already mentioned briefly above, feminist standpoint epistemology was criticized for assuming an essentialist understanding of the category "woman" by feminists working in a post-structuralist,

postmodern and deconstructivist tradition. Followed authors such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, postmodern feminism has emphasized that the meanings of signs are not fixed, but contingent, and change throughout time, place and context. Early work in this tradition still worked from a rather strongly pronounced opposition between male and female ways of knowing, as in Hélène Cixous' call for an "écriture féminine" [23] to destabilize phallogocentric language, in Luce Irigaray's insistence on introducing a notion of true sexual difference in order to grant women a subject position in their own right [24,25], or in Julia Kristeva's departure from Lacan's emphasis on the father figure, language and knowledge (the symbolic) and turn towards a focus on the mother figure and the preverbal stage preceding identity formation (the semiotic) to make room for a playful disruption of the logocentric language controlled by the father [26]. The work of later postmodernist feminists such as prominently Judith Butler [27], however, has focused on the critique of essentialist understandings of what being a woman entails and on the deconstruction of the idea of natural and necessary binary differences between men and women, which, they argued, have served to justify women's exclusion and oppression. Instead, they have drawn attention to the mutual social and discursive construction of sex as a biological category and gender as a social category. In this way, they have advanced the internal critique of feminist discourse through questioning the basic category of "woman" as the epistemic subject as well as the object of analysis presupposed by feminist theory. By asking questions such as which subjects are constituted as part of the category woman, and which subjects are being excluded through the discursive construction of a normative idea of "woman", postmodernist feminists have drawn attention to the way in which large parts of feminist theorizing took the experiences of white, heterosexual, middle-class women as the taken-for-granted standard. Arguing that there is no transcendent truth or objectively correct way in which to apply the identity category "woman" and insisting that it is an open, unstable construct which we "perform" [28], they drew attention to the internal diversity and the blurred boundaries of what counts as women's experience and is represented in feminist theorizing.

One of the persistent worries raised by critics against the postmodern insistence on the instability of the category of "woman" has been that it undermines the basis on which claims to objective knowledge about women's situation, the articulation of critique and the organization of political action for social transformation become possible. Authors such as Susan Bordo [29], Donna Haraway [30] and Seyla Benhabib [31] have pointed to the danger of replacing the rightfully criticized "view of nowhere" of a supposedly neutral epistemic subject with the equally uninhabitable "view from everywhere" of infinitely differently embodied, situated, and interested knowers. Insofar as the infinite internally differentiated perspectives are all placed on equal par with each other, we run the danger of not having any criterion available to judge the validity of knowledge claims raised from any single perspective.

A third central strand within feminist epistemology has developed from a decidedly analytic and empiricist tradition. Feminist empiricists equally criticize the neglect of women philosophers in the philosophical canon as well as the structural discrimination against women in the sciences, which leads to the systematic underrepresentation of women scientists and women's concerns in knowledge production in general. Building mainly on post-positivist empiricist theorizing, prominently on Willard van Orman Quine's "naturalized epistemology", they emphasize the role of experience for epistemic practices while retaining that theory always remains underdetermined by evidence which requires considering the complex interdependence between theoretical preconceptions and experiential evidence in our practices of scientific observation. Following Quine and others, feminist empiricists understand epistemology as a non-foundational enterprise concerned with the empirical investigation of actual scientific practices. However, they generally reject Quine's clear separation of facts and values, arguing that feminist values can have an important function in countering sexist biases in scientific research. Furthermore, they go beyond Quine in emphasizing the role of scientific communities and networks and endorse a view of epistemology as a decidedly social rather than individual enterprise (see for example [32–36]). In this way many later feminist empiricists working in Quine's footsteps do not subscribe to a naïve idea of experience or empirical evidence as they were frequently charged

for, and they also conceive of knowledge as produced by socially situated knowers rather than as an ahistorical relation between empirical facts and isolated individuals. In this way they do not fall prey to the criticisms frequently raised against feminist empiricists. [36] This short exposition of the three central traditions one can distinguish within feminist epistemology should help not only to illustrate the breadth of the work that has been contributed to epistemology by feminist philosophers, but also prepares the background for being better able to locate the various positions when we now turn to the special case of different ways in which objectivity has been conceptualized by feminist epistemologists.

3.2. *Re-Thinking Objectivity within Feminist and Other Post-Positivist Epistemologies*

From the example of the debate in philosophy of education discussed above (confer chapter 2) it might appear that the battle lines in philosophy of education go between those who claim that knowledge is in a relevant sense perspectival or situated which discredits all claims to objective knowledge or truth as unjustified universalization of particular standpoints or perspectives (feminists), and on the other hand those who want to hold on to the possibility of defining criteria by which a description of the world can be said to be objectively superior to other descriptions (epistemologists). I hope that the following discussion will help to correct this picture. My argument rests on the central idea that what is the true challenge of feminist standpoint epistemology is its re-working (rather than merely abandoning) of a narrow conception of objectivity and rationality, a conception which is actually shared by quite a few epistemologists and feminists alike. I will try to show that feminists and epistemologists “in the world of general philosophy” [13] (p. 124) can be equally found to (1) reject narrow objectivism and embrace relativism of some form (T1); (2) defend narrow objectivisms (T2); and (3) repudiate narrow objectivism and defend broader objectivisms as well as broader notions of rationality (T3). Following the detailed analysis put forth by Alice Crary [30], it is the third option (T3) which I consider the most fruitful route for thinking about the contemporary challenges regarding the epistemic aims of education as well as epistemic questions of teaching, learning, and curriculum theory.

As discussed above, Nancy Hartsock’s original proposal for a feminist standpoint theory has been widely criticized for its (alleged) essentialism regarding the women’s standpoint as well as for not paying enough attention to the differences between various groups of women and also between the lives of different individual women. As Alice Crary rightly points out, if feminist criticism was indeed only possible from “a perspective that is essentially and exclusively women’s” [37] (p. 184), then this form of social criticism would not be able to lay claim to objective authority and thus undermine one of Lukács’ main points. Therefore, Crary prefers Sandra Harding’s account for “her description of objective, non-essentialist modes of thought that are dedicated to making sense of anomalous elements in women’s experience” [37] (p. 185), because “if we are to account for what is anomalous in women’s experience, we need to look at women’s lives from a perspective informed by an appreciation of the injustice of structures that keep women as a group in an inferior social position” [37] (p. 185). The non-essentialist, and objective form of standpoint theory which Crary champions claims that “a good understanding of women’s lives is unavailable apart from an appreciation of the insidiousness of sexism” [37] (p. 185). In order to avoid the association with the any essentialism Crary speaks of “feminist objectivisms” [37] (p. 186), and it is these so-called “feminist objectivisms” which I think deserve further attention if we want to go beyond option (T1) and (T2) discussed above.

Crary is well aware that feminist objectivisms have been met with criticism also from many feminist theorists. However, she is careful to point out that, while the rejection of objectivity is widely associated with “feminist postmodernism” (e.g., [27,38]), there are also feminist theorists who would claim the label postmodernist for themselves and who would nevertheless want to endorse a wider conception of objectivity (e.g., [39]). Also, she discusses those feminist theorists who defend the traditional, narrow conception of objectivity, often associated with “feminist empiricists” or “liberal feminists”, where again she is careful to make room for the possibility of being an empiricist and liberal while defending (T3). In order to allow for as much precision as possible, Crary ultimately distinguishes between “feminist skeptics” who criticize epistemology’s claim to a standpoint of

nowhere to the extent that they come to reject objectivity altogether (T1), “feminist objectivists” who endorse a broad notion of objectivity (T3), and “traditional objectivists” who might also endorse a political feminist agenda but defend the traditional narrow conception of objectivity (T2).

There are a couple of points I would like to make here. Firstly, in the debate between Cato and Ford outlined above, only the position of feminist skeptics (defending T1), and traditional objectivists (defending T2) appear within the horizon of the discussion, while the position of the feminist objectivisms (T3) does not receive adequate attention. Lorraine Code, whose work is discussed in the article by Lang aiming to defend Ford’s take on standpoint epistemology, argues that “on a continuum between extreme objectivism and radical relativism, the mitigated versions of each would approach one another quite closely” [40] (p. 320). She recommends a “mitigated relativism” [40] which allows to *critically evaluate* different perspectives and purposes of situated knowledge claims. She finds it preferable to a mitigated objectivism “for the freedom it offers from the homogenizing effects of traditional objectivism” and because “with its commitment to difference, critical relativism is able to resist reductivism and is able to accommodate divergent perspectives” [40] (p. 320). At the same time such critical relativism is *mitigated* “in its constraints by ‘the facts’ of material objects and social/political artifacts” [40] (p. 321). Code does not consider her own account as a full-fledged account of objectivity, but she conceives of power and prejudice as mechanisms which produce knowledge of these “facts”. In this way she upholds a distinction between brute fact and knowledge as a social construction built on these facts which still underwrites the traditional narrow conception of objectivity even in her rejection of it. Furthermore, it remains unclear on which grounds the critical evaluation of different perspectives would be grounded from a relativist perspective. Barbara Thayer-Bacon defends a similar constructivist position when she defends her “qualified relativism” as preferable to what she calls “non-vulgar absolutism” [41]. She also recognizes that non-vulgar relativism and non-vulgar absolutism (*i.e.*, objectivism) have more in common with each other than with the respective extreme positions. But she attributes the choice for “non-vulgar absolutism”, which is close to the broad objectivism I defend here, to a wish for “a Real world independent of human influence” [41] (p. 436). In contrast I would want to insist that the “real world” as we encounter it is always already shaped by human influence and yet nonetheless very “real”, which in my view is brought to the fore much more clearly if we insisted more strongly on a qualified or mitigated objectivism rather than relativism. Crary’s insistence on a broad objectivism is more honest about the ultimate claims it wants to raise. Her proposal cuts deeper. She claims that the traditional, narrow conception of objectivity actually “misrepresents what objectivity is like” [37] (p. 10).

Drawing on Wittgenstein, and in a similar vein as the interpretations of his work by Stanley Cavell and John McDowell, Crary argues that the traditional, narrow conception of objectivity is inadequate when it assumes that we have to *abstract* from our subjective endowments in order to arrive at an objective view of reality. (She calls this the *abstraction requirement*.) To be clear, she believes that we need to rid ourselves of the narrow conception of objectivity *in order to arrive at an adequate picture* of “our concept of (full-blooded) objectivity” [37] (p. 22), *not* in order to do away with it. As she understands Wittgenstein, his “attack on an abstraction requirement is intended not to discredit the concept of objectivity per se but rather to correct what he sees as an inaccurate conception of it” [37] (p. 25) because there is something “internally confused about the idea of an abstraction requirement” [37] (p. 26). In the wider conception which she endorses there is then “no longer any question of an ideally abstract standpoint from which to make the a priori, metaphysical determination that every (even problematically) subjective property is as such disqualified from objectivity” [37] (p. 28). This, however, does leave room for the idea that some ascriptions might be “grounded in a *mere* projection of particular subjective propensities” [37] (p. 28), but also for cases in which an ascription of subjective properties “figures in the best, objectively most accurate account of how things are and, further, that the person who lacks the subjective endowments that would allow her to recognize them is simply missing something” [37] (p. 28). Her repudiation of the abstraction requirement not only leads to her endorsement of the wider notion of objectivity, but furthermore to the repudiation of a narrow

conception of rationality. If it is not “possible to get our minds around how things are independently of the possession of any sensitivities, we [. . .] make room for an alternative conception on which the exercise of rationality necessarily presupposes the possession of certain sensitivities” [37] (p. 118f.), such as a general appreciation of the insidiousness of sexism in order to arrive at a rational account of social reality in sexist societies.

Secondly, I would like to point out that a number of authors, whose work receives serious attention, defend (T1) as well as (T3) without also pursuing a “feminist agenda”, attempting to “hijack” epistemology, as Cato had described it. The work of Richard Rorty, for example, could be aligned with the outright rejection of the narrow conception of objectivity and a full-hearted embracing of relativism (T1). While the more traditional epistemologists in philosophy of education might strongly criticize his work, they would certainly refrain from dismissing it as “having nothing to contribute” to philosophy or philosophy of education. This becomes quite obvious when we consider the fact that the issue on “Epistemology and Education” so dismissive of feminist epistemology included an article on the epistemological implications of the work of John McDowell. At the end of the article, the author states: “Reason cannot be neatly extracted from everyday life and behavior. Just as experience is conceptual ‘all the way down’, reason is always and everywhere manifested in actual situations, bound up with habits, emotions, and all the rest” [42] (p. 211f.). Besides McDowell, also the work of Robert Brandom and his account of objectivity “as consisting in a kind of perspectival *form*, rather than in a nonperspectival or cross-perspectival *content*” [43] (p. 600) could with some justification be aligned with (T3). This is just to underscore that Crary and the “feminist objectivists” she aligns her own position with are not the only ones to develop such a position.

When looking more closely at the concrete educational implications such a broader understanding of objectivity and rationality would have for the development of curriculum, of our conceptions of teaching and learning as well as of the epistemic aims of education, we will surely notice a significant amount of overlap with some revisions of traditional understandings which have been brought about through the constructivist turn. Teachers and creators of textbooks and other teaching materials need to be carefully aware of their own social position from which they present the knowledge children are supposed to acquire, and students need to become aware also about the various biases attached to their own standpoint from which they acquire knowledge about the world. In contrast to constructivism, however, it does not regard knowledge as a “mere” construction. Furthermore, a broad understanding of objectivity and rationality as suggested for example by Crary, also explains why we are not likely to arrive at an adequate understanding of the consequences of sexist, classist, heteronormative and other biases through a mere confrontation with “facts”, but that arriving at an objective and rational assessment of social might require an extensive cultivation of our sensitivities. In this way, we can understand why certain efforts in social justice education which underestimate these dimension might backfire rather than contribute to an emancipatory education for all students. Last but not least, such a position allows us to argue why not all perspectives are given equally much space, importance or weight in textbooks and also in classroom discussions since it clearly takes distance from sexist, racist, homophobic, or other repressive language as articulating merely another ‘perspective’ by outspokenly laying claim to objectivity and rationality.

4. Feminist Epistemology and Education in the 21st Century. A Look into the Future

Another more recent contribution to feminist epistemology is Miranda Fricker’s concept of “epistemic injustice” [3]. Working in the borderland between ethics and epistemology, Fricker wants to explore “questions of justice and power in epistemic practices” [3] (p. 2) while avoiding the reductionist tendencies in the postmodernist discussion. She considers the socially situated understanding of knowledge a valuable extension of the traditional abstract conception of knowledge. Nevertheless, in line with Crary, Fraser, and others discussed above, she emphasizes that we have to be careful to retain a clear distinction between reason, social power and prejudices against other knowers in order to reveal how “epistemic injustice wrongs someone in their capacity as a subject of knowledge” [3] (p. 5)

through the ways in which epistemic authority is granted or not. In this way she wants to contribute to making our epistemic practices “at once more rational and more just” [3] (p. 4). In this way Fricker is careful to consider how question of justice are integral to epistemological questions, while also not conflating one with the other.

Fricker’s concept of epistemic injustice serves well as a foil against which to understand some of the ambivalences with which feminist epistemology has been received within philosophy of education. In general philosophy, the biased attitude against feminist philosophy has been called out as a “double standard” [44]. A similar double standard is at times detectable in philosophy of education as well. Feminists’ demands for a shift of the epistemic framework originating in the Enlightenment ideals of science, rationality and objectivity, have been met with mixed reactions. Cato’s (2008) dismissal of Ford’s article as reducing epistemology to politics and power relations and embracing a strong relativist position is one such example. I hope that I have shown convincingly that feminist epistemologists have criticized traditional, narrow objectivism from a multitude of angles and without accepting simplistic forms of relativism or even defending relativist positions at all, and that, furthermore, many mainstream (non-feminist) philosophers similarly defend a post-foundationalist epistemology nowadays. I have also pointed to some promising examples within philosophy of education where these parallels and overlaps of feminist and non-feminist epistemologies are recognized and feminist epistemologies’ achievements receive more adequate acknowledgment or are employed to discuss epistemological issues in education in a broader context which goes beyond strictly feminist interests and questions (cf. e.g., [10,16,37,41,45–47]). In a footnote, Cray makes the following statement: “Although *non-feminist* critiques of ‘narrower’ metaphysics are often discussed within mainstream philosophical circles, they are rarely assessed in the same patronizing terms” [37] (p. 189). I think it is time to acknowledge that fruitful perspectives laying claim to non-traditional understandings of objectivity and reason can be extracted from feminist criticism, which show the traditional conceptions as inadequate and propose more fitting alternatives, rather than reducing all questions of knowledge to questions of power and simply embracing relativism. And I think these broader understandings of objectivity and rationality are highly instructive if we want to adequately discuss questions such as which knowledge, epistemic skills, abilities, or character traits should matter in 21st century education, in globalizing, pluralist societies which continue to be shaped by sexist, classist, racist, ableist, heteronormative, and other biases.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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